

CLAIMS

The below listing of claims replaces all prior versions and listings of claims.

Listing of Claims

1. (cancelled)

2. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played comprises granting an award to the player based on an outcome of one or more particular free games.

3. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played comprises granting an award to the player based on a display of a particular symbol during one or more of the free games.

4. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played comprises granting an award to the player based on a display of a particular symbol across an activated payline during one or more of the free games.

5. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a jackpot, a portion of a jackpot, a fixed award, a progressive award, or a mystery award to the player.

6. (cancelled)

7. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes from each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting an award to the player based on accumulated winning units from winning outcomes of free game played.

8. (original) The method of Claim 7 further comprising detecting a signal that the player has won more winning units during the free game bonus round than other players participating in the free game bonus round and, in response to such detecting, awarding the player an additional award.

9. (original) The method of Claim 7 wherein the winning units are credits.

10. (original) The method of Claim 7 wherein the winning units are points.
11. (cancelled)
12. (cancelled)
13. (currently amended) The method of ~~Claim 12~~¹⁸ further comprising calculating a level of the free game pot sufficient to pay for all free games played during the free game bonus round.
14. (currently amended) The method of Claim 13 wherein calculating the level comprises multiplying N by a maximum bet for ~~the first~~^{each} gaming machine.
15. (original) The method of Claim 13 wherein calculating the level comprises calculating the total amount of virtual wagers that will be bet during the free game bonus round.
16. (cancelled)
17. (cancelled)
18. (currently amended) A method performed by a system of linked gaming machines comprising:
 - receiving wagers from players playing paid games on the linked gaming machines;
 - detecting a free game bonus round initiation signal by a plurality of the linked gaming machines eligible for playing a free game bonus round;
 - enabling each player of the linked gaming machines that are involved in the free game bonus round to play a plurality of free games;
 - accumulating an amount in a free game pot, common to the plurality of the linked gaming machines, based at least partially on a percentage of wagers from the paid games on the linked gaming machines, the free game pot for funding the free game bonus round;
 - granting an award to one or more of the players, based on outcomes of the free games played; and

deducting amounts from the free game pot to fund the free games being played, wherein accumulating an amount in the free game pot comprises dynamically adjusting the percentage of wagers from the paid games to the free game pot depending on a level of the free game pot, and wherein a percentage of wagers from the paid games when funding the free game pot is less than 100%.

wherein the free game pot is funded by a first percentage of the wagers from the paid games prior to the level of the free game pot reaching a level determined to be necessary to ensure full funding of all free games played during the free game bonus round, wherein the free game pot is funded at a second percentage, including zero, lower than the first level after it is determined that the level of the free game pot is sufficient to fund all free games played during the free game bonus round, and

wherein the free game bonus round initiation signal is only issued once it has been determined that the free game pot is at the level determined to be necessary to ensure full funding of all free games played during the free game bonus round.

19. (cancelled)

20. (currently amended) The method of Claim 11-18 wherein each free game played is a game played with the player's last wager from the paid games prior to the initiation of the free game bonus round.

21. (cancelled)

22. (previously presented) The method of Claim 18 further comprising filling, with a percentage of the wagers for the paid games, a plurality of pots used for the free game bonus round, the plurality of pots including a jackpot in addition to the free game pot.

23. (original) The method of Claim 22 wherein the plurality of pots further comprises a hidden jackpot for supplying an initial level of the jackpot after the jackpot has been won.

24. (original) The method of Claim 22 further comprising dynamically allocating a percentage of the wagers for the paid games to the jackpot and the free game pot depending on the level of the free game pot.

25. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a jackpot based on the number of winning units won during the free game bonus round.

26. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a first bonus amount if a number of winning units won during the free game bonus round exceeds a first level, and granting a second bonus amount if a number of winning units won during the free game bonus round exceeds a second level, higher than the first level.

27. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on a random event.

28. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on a random time event.

29. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on an outcome of the gaming machine.

30. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on a predetermined event.

31. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising:
funding a jackpot from a percentage of wagers from the paid games; and
generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on the jackpot reaching a certain level.

32. (currently amended) The method of Claim ~~4-18~~ further comprising:
funding two or more jackpots from different percentages of wagers from the paid games; and
generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on any of the jackpots reaching a certain level.

33. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein the paid games comprise spinning reels having symbols, where awards are based on combinations of symbols obtained after the reels stop spinning.

34. (original) The method of Claim 33 wherein the spinning reels are displayed on a video screen.

35. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein the method further comprises awarding a jackpot based on an outcome of a free game bonus round.

36. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 wherein the method further comprises awarding one of a plurality of jackpots based on an outcome of a free game bonus round.

37. (cancelled)

38. (cancelled)

39. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a bonus amount, wherein the amount depends on a number of winning units accumulated during the free game bonus round.

40. (currently amended) The method of Claim 4-18 further comprising splitting a jackpot amongst players at the end of the free game bonus round.

41-58 cancelled.

59. (new) The method of Claim 18 wherein the level of the free game pot determined to be necessary to ensure full funding of all free games played during the free game bonus round is not predetermined but is dependent upon current conditions while paid games are being played.